

Negotiating Participation in the Local English-speaking Community: A Case Study of Chinese Learners in Britain

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Abstract:

This article reports on a qualitative multiple case study that explored six Chinese learners' experiences of negotiating participation in the local English-speaking community in Britain. Drawing on a variety of sources (ethnographic observations, informal conversations and narrative interviews), the analysis focuses on the opportunities that this group of Chinese learners have gained to interact with local British outside the language classroom, the obstacles that constrain their interaction, and the language teachers' roles in assisting their participation in the local English-speaking community. The findings suggest that restricted by access barrier, linguistic barrier, culture barrier and psychological barrier, the chances the participants have gained to associate with local British are uneven and limited than they have expected. Meanwhile, language teachers have the potential to play a more supportive role in enhancing the Chinese students' engagement in the local English-speaking community.

Key Words: ESL, COP, Chinese learners, study abroad, Britain

1. INTRODUCTION

Following the trend of globalisation, there have been a significant increasing number of international students coming to study in the 'inner circle' English-speaking countries, such as the US, the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand in the last decade. China remains one of the top source countries of the international students (Henze & Zhu, 2012; Griner & Sobol, 2014). Correspondingly, international students' learning and living experiences in host countries have become an important research area. There is a considerable literature on the potential role of TESOL in helping international students to cope well both academically and socially in English-speaking countries (e.g. Leki, 2001; Morita, 2004; Yakimchuk, 2010; Phakiti *et al.*, 2013; Shi, 2011; Yates & Wahid, 2013). Most of these studies were set in university contexts, while little attention has been paid to international students studying in language schools at pre-university level. This study aims to make contribution to this understudied field by looking at a group of Chinese learners studying in language schools in the UK.

Those Chinese students who choose to study English in Britain usually have a belief in the power of studying abroad for learning English, as the extensive authentic interaction with native speakers that in-country living can provide can be hardly duplicated in EFL classroom. Given the high cost of study abroad in time and money, and the importance of authentic interaction in English language acquisition, those Chinese students' English language learning journeys in Britain do not always end with happiness and success, since extensive exposure to English does not often guarantee Chinese learners plentiful opportunities to practice the target language, especially to have meaningful conversations with other English-speakers (see, Edwards *et al.*, 2007; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Tian & Lowe, 2009). Then, there is a crucial need to learn about the particular difficulties that those Chinese learners encounter when they seek opportunities for practising their English outside the language classroom. Adopting the communities-of-practice perspective (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), I investigate how a group of Chinese learners struggle for their participation and membership in the local English-speaking community through their interaction with English-speakers outside of the language classroom, and how language teachers support the Chinese learners' participation process in a limited way.

2. THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

This study follows 'the social turn' (Block, 2003) in applied linguistic research, which views second language learning (SLL) as essentially a social practice (Firth & Wanger, 1997). The theoretical and interpretive framework of this study builds on the concept of communities of practice (COP), which describe learning as a process in which a group of people, who have a common interest, learn through their mutual engagement in shared activities in an ongoing community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In particular, Lave and Wenger (1991) use the

concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) to characterise learning as ‘a socially situated process by which newcomers gradually move towards fuller participation in a given community’s activities by interacting with more experienced community members’ (Morita citing Lave & Wenger, p. 576). Furthermore, Lave and Wenger (1991) point out that LPP is never a peaceful but conflictual process of assimilating into a community of practice. Although the notion of LPP is highly valued in SLL research, it has been criticised for insufficiently addressing the implications of unequal positions distributed to members within a community of practice. For instance, applying LPP to minority research, Kanno (1999) argues that it fails to demonstrate the structural barriers to language minority students’ full participation in the school community clearly. Haneda (2006) also suggests that under the theoretical framework of COP, what opportunities full participation in the target community are afforded to newcomers need further study. Accordingly, this study particularly looks at both the chances and barriers that influence Chinese learners’ interaction with other English speakers, which is regarded as an important resource for their English learning.

Recognising that access to community resources and opportunities for participation may not always exist, this study also focuses on whether formal instruction can facilitate newcomers’ participation into community practices or not. The theory of communities of practice was originally meant to apply to understand some aspects of informal learning, and all the examples Lave and Wenger (1991) use to illustrate this theory take place in nonschool settings. However, this does not mean that classroom training has no impact on LPP, as Wenger (1998, p. 250) advises classroom instruction is ‘to supplement, not substitute for, the learning potential inherent in practice’, and classroom instruction can facilitate newcomers’ participation in the target community by sharing information and increasing their understanding of their ‘peripheral engagement in practice’. Although Wenger (1998) outlines the positive role that formal instruction can play in the process of LPP, the relationship between classroom learning and participation into practice has been criticised as lack of analytical clarity (Haneda, 2006). Then, the data of this study will try to illustrate how language classroom instruction can be integrated into Chinese learners’ authentic practices in the local English-speaking community.

3. ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN NON-CLASSROOM SETTINGS

The opportunity to practise and improve English outside of the classroom is one of the main reasons that many international students choose to study in an English-speaking country (Copland and Garton, 2011). Under this motivation, the international students actively seek for chances for interaction in the local English-speaking context. Conversational interaction is suggested to be fundamental to second language development through adjustments in conversation (Long, 1996). Norton and Toohey (2001, p. 310) also attribute the success of good second language learners to their ‘access to a variety of conversations in their community’. Accordingly, from both English language learners’ perspective and SLL professionals’

perspective, interaction with target language speakers in non-classroom settings plays a determining role in international students' English language learning process.

As I discussed in the previous section, the notion of COP sets up an insightful theoretic framework to study the inter-relationship among individuals, interactions and social contexts. However, a few studies conceptualise SLL as a social practice, located in non-classroom settings, compared to an increasing number of SLL studies that view the classroom as a community of practice (e.g. Haneda, 2008; Kim, 2011; Iddings, 2005; Miller and Zuengler, 2011; Morita, 2004; Toohey, 1998; Wiltse, 2001). Norton (2000) is notable for her longitudinal ethnographic study, in which the two immigrant women, Eva and Mai struggled for their participation in the English linguistic resources of their workplaces in Canada, and finally gained more opportunities to practice their English. Warriner (2010), for example, focuses on the experiences of three women refugees enrolled in an adult ESL program in America, and explores the multiple and contrasting ways how women refugees learn to use English to access material and symbolic resources across various contexts. She points out that these women's English learning and using experiences are not only culturally situated, but also influenced by their participation in particular workplace communities of practice. Giroir (2014) investigates how two Saudi Arabian men of Muslim group renegotiate their peripheral participation through their ongoing interactions with English 'experts' in a host community in the US in post-9/11 contexts. In terms of the imbalance of the research interests in COP and SLL area, close examination of how second language knowledge is acquired through interaction in the local target language speaking context continues to be needed. Through the lens of the theoretical construction of COP, this study conceptualises the various settings outside of the language classroom as a general local English-speaking community, in which participants mutually engage with each other, negotiate for joint enterprises, and develop shared repertoires together (Wenger, 1998). International students, as new members, will ideally become competent English-speakers through repeated interaction with other experienced English-speakers and engagement in the sociocultural activities of the local English-speaking community. Nevertheless, Norton (2000) contends that the local English-speaking community is not always English learning friendly, as ESL learners' access to information, linguistic resources and the opportunities for participation is structured by inequitable power relationship embedded in the community, and native English speakers may not always assist ESL learners in participating in the target language speaking community. Therefore, this study seeks to provide deep understanding of the complicated relationship among international students' own interaction needs, the linguistic activities and practices in which they participate, and the sociocultural context in which they are situated. Furthermore, this study will also look for the ways through which educators can support international students to overcome the obstacles they face, when they participate in the local English-speaking community outside the language classroom.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data used in this article is selected from a thirteen-month study of a group of Chinese learners studying in three language schools in Britain. I primarily tracked four Chinese students in one language school and two Chinese students in other two language schools separately for nine months, from their registration to completion of their programmes. Of the multiple sources of data collected for the original study (see the Appendix in Gao, 2011, p. 303), this article primarily draws on the followings: classroom observation; conversations with the six Chinese students; and final narrative interviews with the six Chinese students. Because I was not allowed to record the whole class sessions, only significant discussions arising in the classroom were digitally recorded and transcribed. In addition, detailed field notes were made during classroom observation. Frequent informal face to face conversations in various settings, such as the high street, supermarkets, coffee shops, my house or their houses, helped me gather the data on what was going on with the Chinese students' English language learning and lives outside the classroom. I hoped that these informal conversations would facilitate the expression and analysis of personal and private experiences. Since most of these conversations happened spontaneously in various contexts, it was not feasible to take out a digital recorder to record them straightaway. Furthermore, I wanted the participants perceiving me as another Chinese student, a friend, or an elder sister. I did not want my role as researcher to dominate my relationship with the participants, as I thought this might create too much distance between us. It was for these two reasons that I decided to take notes immediately afterwards, and then checked the content of the notes with my participants by phone later. All the notes were converted to the proximity of the conversation, which I constructed carefully, and would be as faithful as possible to the original. The six follow-up narrative interviews were conducted mainly in Chinese and digitally recorded for a period of roughly an hour and a half each. All the interviews were translated and transcribed from sound files into English by myself. I then asked a Chinese PhD student in our department to listen to the recordings and check some parts of the translation about which I felt uncertain.

The data analysis was primarily inductive: I began the data analysis by coding all the transcripts and field notes with short phrases. Basic categories were generated through content analysis of the data resources. Subsequently, I started to write up a comprehensive chapter on each participant, which would allow me to make cross-references across both historical time and social space. During the writing process, I reduced the many categorises to a number of themes, with coded data supported. Finally, I summarised the key themes, with coded data attached as supporting evidence, for all six participants. This allowed me to see the extent to which an issue is represented across cases, and to grasp common threads across cases. The outcome of this study was sent to all the participants to make sure that I do not misinterpret their learning and living experiences in Britain. The key themes related to Chinese learners' struggle to participate into the local English-speaking community in Britain include: the opportunities and the barriers for the participants to participate in the local English-speaking community, and language teachers' instruction facilitating Chinese learners' participation in this community. Based on these themes, I developed the data sections.

5. PARTICIPANTS

This article involves six focal Chinese students, who newly arrived in Britain. Fan, Lan and Yin were female, and Jin, Zhu and Xu were male. These six varied in age from 18 to 24. Jin, Zhu, Fan and Lan registered in a 36-week International Business Foundation Programme in the same class in a language school. Xu and Yin took a 10-month English language programme in two language schools respectively. All the participants were born and grew up in Mainland China. All of them had just finished their high school, excepted Zhu, who had already studied in a university in Mainland China for two years. They all came from well-off families in Mainland China. Of the six participants, Jin was the only one, who came from a mixed family, as his father was South Korean, and his mother was Taiwanese. His mixed family background made the way how he constructed his Chinese national identity during his journey in Britain different from the other five participants (see the details in Gao, 2008). (A detailed overview of the six participants can be found in the Appendix of Gao, 2011, p. 304-305.)

6. THE OPPORTUNITIES OF PARTICIPATING IN THE LOCAL ENGLISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY

The opportunities for newcomers to interact with old-timers and expose to situated social practice is critical to LPP, as Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 100-101) explains, 'to become a full member of a community of practice requires access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old-timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources and opportunities for participation.' Accordingly, Chinese students need to gain exposure to English-speaking practices and support from other experienced English-speakers to become more fully engaged in the local-English speaking community.

6.1 Interaction with Host Families

The host family was the first place where Jin, Fan and Xu had regular exposure to native English speakers outside the classroom. Jin lived with a big host family from October 2005 to December 2005. The host couple had three children: one 7-year old girl, one 10-year old boy with learning difficulties, and one 14-year old girl with bad temper according to Jin. Although living with five British people, the conversation between them and Jin was not as productive as Jin expected.

F: Do you talk a lot with your host family?

Jin: No, after my class, I go swimming, and then go back around 8 pm. Every day, when I come back, the 10-year old boy will ask me, 'Do you have a good day?' 'Yes' I answer. He repeats the question again and again.

...

F: Do you talk with the 14-year old girl? You two are of similar ages.

Jin: No, she doesn't like to talk to me.

F: What do the parents do?

Jin: The mother works as a cleaner from midnight 12:00 am to 8:00 am three days a week, and the father works in a railway station. They are lower class people, who don't have broad knowledge, so we have nothing to talk about. (Talk with Jin, 24/10/05)

Jin chose to live in a host family instead of sharing a house with other students, because he wanted to practise speaking English with native English speakers. Although Jin was in an English environment, in contact with British people, the availability and the particular personalities of different host family members blocked Jin's communication with the host family. Realising this English environment did not provide him enough opportunities to practise his English, Jin decided to change his host family after Christmas.

The second host family was much simpler compared to the previous one. Jin shared the house with Ivan, his Russian classmate, and an old English host lady, Margaret. Margaret worked for unemployed people, so there were always people coming to complain about their depressed lives. Another group of visitors were teenagers who came to buy cigarettes, since Margaret sold cigarettes for her father in the house. As Jin described, 'I'm involved in meeting either unemployed adults or problematic teenagers' (Conversation with Jin, 15/04/06). Generally, Margaret talked to Jin during breakfast and dinner for no more than half an hour per day.

F: Which topics do you usually talk about?

Jin: We don't have many common topics to talk about, since she is so old. When we meet, we always try to find something to talk about. Generally, we talk about my study and some universities. (Talk with Jin, 17/04/06)

Jin gained access to a group of English people in the second host family. However, different ages and different life experiences resulted in limited meaningful conversations. In order to avoid the embarrassment of silence at breakfast time, Jin shifted his interest to watching TV soaps.

Similar to Jin, Xu's interaction with his host family was regular but limited, although the mother and the son of his host family seemed to be supportive.

Xu: The host father spoke English with a strong accent, and he didn't like to talk. The host mother always tried to find some topics to talk with me. We usually talked about some general topics, like the weather in the morning for around 15 minutes. In the evening, when I came back from the school, the host mother used to ask me what happened to me during the day for around 10 minutes. The son of the family is a lecturer, who always tried to speak English with me slowly. But he went to work in another country after Christmas. (Interview with Xu, 24/05/06)

Differently from Jin and Xu, who participated in the conversation with their host family passively, Fan tended to initiate the conversation with her host family actively.

Fan: Many students don't talk with their host families. Firstly, in order to build up a good relationship, I decided to talk to them. Without communication, how can you expect they treat you nicely? If you tell your feelings to others, others can understand you, and there wouldn't be a big distance between you and your host family... I often chat with my host family when we have dinner together. Sometimes, we can talk from 7pm to 10pm. (Interview with Fan, 13/06/06)

Fan's effort to interact with her host family members seemed to bring her considerable opportunities in using English to accomplish genuine communication with real interlocutors. With regard to the different characters of the four host families and the three participants' various investment in socialising with the host family members, Jin, Xu and Fan experienced distinct engagements in the practice of the local-English speaking community.

6.2 Interaction with housemates

Yin also had the stable opportunity to meet British people, as she had two British housemates. However, she was reluctant to interact with them because of lack of confidence in her English language capability. They only talked to each other when some problems happened.

We once communicated in English, when we installed the BT internet. At that time, my English was very poor, so I always used very simple English. (Interview, 14/05/06)

Although Yin's English was improving as time went on, she still only had superficial interaction with her British housemates, because

The two British girls are gentle, but they are not open-minded. It's very hard for international students to integrate with typical British. (Interview, 14/05/06)

Yin thought it was not only her insufficient English competence, which stopped her having intensive interaction with her British housemates.

I feel it's quite hard to integrate into their lives. There is a transparent wall, and British are resisting us. (Interview, 14/05/06)

In this extract, Yin used 'a transparent wall' to symbolise the difficulties of engaging in the practices of the local English-speaking community besides her insufficient English. From Yin's view, having massive communication with her British housemates was difficult, since she felt that British people were unwilling to accept her as a member of the local English-speaking community.

6.3 Interaction with colleagues

Zhu worked as a part-time cleaner in a local hospital from 5:00 pm to 8:00 pm, from Monday to Friday. The local hospital became the only reliable context for Zhu to meet and to communicate

regularly with British people outside the language classroom. Zhu reported that he had a good chance to interact directly with the experienced members of the local English-speaking community, but he could not make good use of the chance.

My colleagues in the hospital are British, the local people. If you greet them initially, they are very enthusiastic. They often greet me initially. I am too shy, because I am afraid of making mistakes, and I am quite unsociable. (Interview, 03/06/06)

In this extract, Zhu pointed out that his character prevented him participating into the local English-speaking community. Furthermore, Zhu illustrated the linguistic challenges he faced when he communicated with his colleagues.

If they speak too quickly, I still can't understand now. They also have accents. But if they talk to me formally, and if I also know the topic, I can understand. When they talk with each other, I am sitting aside, I can't understand. My supervisor often talks to me, I can't understand. She frowns, and I am quite depressed. (Interview, 03/06/06)

The speech that Zhu could not understand has the following characteristics: quickly spoken utterances, local accent, informal grammar, or unfamiliar topic. According to my long-term classroom observation, these elements are usually not addressed by the language teacher. This extract illustrates how the English taught in the language classroom can differ vastly from the English that language learners encounter in extra-curricular contexts.

6.4 Interaction with casual encounters

Besides those stable opportunities to meet British people mentioned above, living in Britain also provides the participants a chance to interact with casual interlocutors in English. After school, the participants went to the supermarket, gym, shop, and cinema. In all these social settings, they had to speak English to the staff in order to achieve his purpose. For example, when Jin had problems with getting a credit card, he had to solve the problem by himself.

I applied for seven credit cards one month ago, but got none until now. Fan got her credit card through HSBC, then I went to HSBC. They asked me to fill in an application form. I felt quite strange, and asked them whether it would be ok or not, since I didn't have an account in HSBC. And they told me that it was fine. I waited for a month, and called them to ask why I hadn't got my credit card. They told me it was rejected two weeks ago. (Talk with Jin, 23/11/05)

English was the only accepted language during these social settings, in which Jin was treated as a regular customer and a valid English speaker, rather than an English language learner. Similar to Jin, Xu also had to use English transactionally to obtain information he needed.

I ... speak English when I go to the restaurant or go travelling. But the chances are very limited. I have tried to talk with local people. For example, I went to the high street frequently, and talked with the people in the shop. But it's difficult sometimes. (Interview, 24/05/06)

Xu attempted to improve his oral English skills by taking on the following practices: communicating with waiters/waitresses in restaurants, asking for directions, or obtaining information from shop assistants.

Influenced by the predominated pub culture in the UK, pubs become another possible place for Chinese learners meeting British people. Zhu and Xu used to go to pub with their friends frequently, and had conversations with strange encounters sometimes. However, Jin and Lan found it was difficult to seek for interaction opportunities in the pub, as Jin admitted,

I am not a pub person, and I don't like to drink in a pub. (Interview, 27/05/06)

Similarly, Lan also showed little interest in British pub culture,

The pub is very noisy, and I don't like that place quite much. If I want to go there, I don't know whom I can go with. If I go there, I don't want to go with my classmates, since it's very boring to spend the whole day with the same people. (Interview, 08/06/06)

Lan mentioned two reasons that made her hesitated to go to pub, including unappealing pub environment and the confusion of finding appropriate companies.

In summary, the data reveals four types of experienced members of the local English-speaking community that the participants could access outside the classroom: host family members, housemates, part-time colleagues and casual encounters. In terms of the participants' various English linguistic competence, self-agency, personal characters, preferences and tendencies, they experienced different levels of participation in the oral practice of the local English-speaking community.

7. BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN THE LOCAL ENGLISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY

The six participants seemed to have various access to the local English-speaking community, however, all of them commented that they were not satisfied with both the quantity and the quality of their interaction with British people. The main challenges that prevented the participants' participation into the local English-speaking community can be categorised into access barriers, linguistic barriers, cultural barriers and psychological barriers. Opportunities to socialise with British peers seemed to be limited for the participants, as generally British

students are absent in the language school. In terms of linguistic barriers, Yu, Yin and Zhu found it difficult to follow the local interlocutors, because of their own insufficient English proficiency. Furthermore, the data indicates that the lack of shared topics appeared to be another challenge for Jin, Xu and Zhu. In addition, local accent and fast speed of utterance contribute to Yu and Zhu's trouble conducting conversations with local English people. With respect to cultural barriers, Jin and Lan did not appreciate British pub culture, and avoided participating. Psychological barriers were mentioned symbolically as 'transparent wall' by Yin to refer to the mental distance between British encounters and Chinese students. The participants' passive participation can be related to at least one of the barriers, which limit their chances of developing English language skills.

8. THE SUPPORT OF LANGUAGE TEACHERS

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), the issue of access is crucial to the process of LPP. The participants reported that their language teachers had rarely created opportunities to socialise them with the local English-speaking community, except organising some gatherings in local pubs occasionally. However, the data generated from classroom observation indicates that some of the language teachers' pedagogical practices likely to address linguistic barriers and cultural barriers mentioned above. I found that language teachers generally used two strategies to assist language learners' participation in the local English-speaking community: providing them with knowledge of British English language, and familiarising them with the cultural practices of British society.

Since the language classroom is situated in a British English-speaking community, part of the role of a language teacher is to help prepare language learners to understand British English outside the classroom. To achieve this purpose, the language teachers in this study often distinguished British English expressions by using American English expressions as a point of contrast. In the following two examples, the language teachers, Anita and Duncan pointed out the use of 'chemist' instead of 'pharmacy', and 'in hospital' instead of 'in the hospital' in British English norms.

Anita: Where do you get medicine?

Xu: Pharmacy.

Anita: That's an American way. In England, we say 'chemist'.

(Observation: field notes, 24/01/06)

(Duncan was checking Xu's writing)

Duncan: You'd better say 'in hospital'. In America, people say 'in the hospital', but in the UK, people usually say 'in hospital'.

(Observation: field notes, 16/05/06)

In these two conversations, the language teachers introduced British English expressions with statements, such as ‘in England, we say...’ and ‘you’d better say...in the UK’. The language teachers were encouraging the language learners to use British English expressions instead of American English expressions. In each case, American English norms were presented as less acceptable. This helped the students to understand the linguistic discourse of the English-speaking community in which they were located.

Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that through the process of LPP, newcomers are supposed to observe and learn the practices of old-timers, which might include how they ‘talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives’ (p. 95). Accordingly, besides learning English language norms, the Chinese learners also need to learn the cultural practices of British society to become a functional member in the host society. The field notes of my classroom observation suggest that language teachers either introduce British culture directly to enhance students’ understanding of British society, or use British culture as cultural content for English language teaching. In the following example, the language teacher, Sally introduced to their students the knowledge about British houses.

Sally: What’s a terraced house? Come on, you have been in terraced houses for several months, and you don’t know what a terraced house is?

Fan: You live in a house, and you have neighbours.

Sally: It’s a series of houses, and they share walls, which help to save money and space. You can find them in the town. What’s a semi-detached house?

Zhu: Two houses together.

Sally: Yes, you can find it further away from the city centre.

Fan: My host family lives in an attached house.

Sally: Where is your host family?

Fan: Near to Ashford.

Sally: Yes, that’s a bit far away from the city centre. What’s a detached house?

Lan: The house built up alone.

Sally: Yes. You can find it in the countryside, because you have more spaces there, and you can have a big garden. (Observation: audio recordings, 13/03/06)

In this extract, Fan, Zhu and Lan responded to Sally by giving the information about the characteristics of the houses they had lived in or they had seen in Britain. Sally then developed the participants’ existing knowledge about British houses by explaining the general locations of different types of houses. This is an example of how the Chinese learners’ British culture

learning experiences in the language classroom intersect with their daily life experiences in a rather low level.

Duff and Uchida (1997) argue that language and culture are inseparable in second language teaching, since the content of language courses consists of various aspects of target culture, and language teachers' subtle teaching practices are influenced by their cultural beliefs and values. The following extracts show how the language teachers use British culture to illustrate their teaching tasks. For example, Anita, a female English teacher, was giving an example on 'appointment' to her students.

(Lu is a female Chinese student)

Anita: Appointment. Lu, when your glasses are broken, what will you do?

Lu: I will go to the hospital.

Anita: No, we don't go to hospital in England.

Lu: Go to glasses shop?

Anita: You need to call them and book a specific time to go to see them.

Xu: You need to make an appointment for everything in Britain. (Observation: audio recordings, 24/01/06)

In another language class, Storm, a female English teacher, taught her students how to use 'appropriate English' in the restaurant, in terms of 'fairly decent' English table manners (Fox, 2004, p. 295, citing Mikes), as indicated in the following quote,

Storm: You say 'could I help you?' it's politer than 'may I help you?'

...

Storm: I don't want a starter, or I don't feel like a starter.

Xu: 吃顿饭真累!

It is so tiring to have a meal.

...

Storm: Did you enjoy the dinner? You say, 'it's fine.' Or 'it's delicious.' Or 'it's great' if you really like it.

Xu: If I really don't like the food?

Storm: You say, 'it's so so.' If you really hate it, you can make a complaint. (Observation: field notes, 28/02/06)

In the above two extracts, the language teachers not only taught the students particular phrases and sentence patterns, but also taught them the manners they need to show and the communication skills they need to use outside the language classroom. In addition, I would like to consider further Xu's over-simplistic generalisation — 'you need to make an appointment for everything in Britain', and his complaint — 'it's so tiring to have a meal!' I wonder one possible reason for Xu's careless comment on appointment rules in Britain, and his impatience to learn 'appropriate' English used in a restaurant could be the absence of the language teachers' explanations of the beliefs and values behind these cultural practices. It seems that Xu just do not understand why British people speak English and behave in a certain way, which is the model he is expected to adapt to.

The data presented in this section suggests that language teachers promoted Chinese learners' LPP in the local English-speaking community by providing them necessary knowledge of British English language norms and useful information about cultural practices of British society. Nevertheless, the linguistic forms taught in the language classroom might not be enough for Chinese students' communication with British outside of classroom, and the way how the cultural practices in Britain are introduced by the language teachers may cause confusion when the participants engage in social activities.

9. DISCUSSION

In this study, I have explored a group of Chinese learners' socialisation experiences from a COP perspective by focusing on their participation in the local English speaking community. The focal students' experiences indicated, first of all, that studying in the UK provided them with various but uneven opportunities to contact with local English speakers. Staying in host families, sharing a house with two British girls, and working in a local hospital allowed Jin, Xu, Fan, Yin and Zhu to have regular association with British. The interaction between Jin and Xu and their host family members usually happened around meal times, and was often restricted to simple English conversation about routines and daily activities. The communication between Yin and her British housemates only occurred when they had to deal with some daily issues together. Zhu's interaction with his colleagues was also limited to routine short dialogue. While with high motivation and personal efforts, Fan managed to develop extensive conversations with her host family at dinner time. Besides those stable communicative opportunities, the participants also found chances to interact with unfamiliar British encounters in different natural settings occasionally, including supermarket, gym, shop, restaurant, cinema, high street and pub. These conversations were mainly conducted to obtain information, to get things done, or to socialise. The lengths of these reported conversations with casual encounters were various, lasting from more than one hour (e.g. in the pub) to less than five minutes (e.g. in the shop).

According to the data, there are four prime factors that inhibit the students' engagements in the practice of local English-speaking community. One of the main reasons for the students' restricted use of English outside the classroom is access barrier. In this study, Lan was almost

unable to access the local English-speaking community. It seemed that Jin, Xu, Fan, Yin and Zhu could rely on their host families, housemates or British colleagues for gaining access to interactions with British, but this access was not always available. For example, Jin and Xu reported that they felt their hosts treated hosting international students as a commercial enterprise, and they were not genuinely interested in the students. Particularly, due to different time schedule and busy work, Jin even found challenging to meet his first host parents.

Inadequate English proficiency is the second inhibitor. English language competence has been identified by many scholars as an important factor that influences international students' opportunities to interact with the members of the host community (e.g. Copland and Garton, 2011; Shi, 2011; Tanaka, 2007). In this study, Xu, Yin and Jun's low English level is an impediment to their communication with host families, housemates and hospital colleagues respectively. On the one hand, the three participants felt difficult to communicate with native speakers in English, even when they had high motivation to do so; On the other hand, the British encounters seemed to be unwilling or unused to make adjustment to the participants' English level. As Xu reported that he felt comfortable communicating with the son of his host family, who was a lecturer, and adopted the language-teacher-like role when talking to him.

The students' perceptions of British culture also influence the amount of interactive contact with British outside the classroom. For instance, Jin and Lan's disapproval of the prevalent drinking culture in the UK prevented them meeting and mixing with British in the pub. As Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) suggest that drinking in the pub is not a common practice in Chinese culture, which can be problematical for those Chinese students brought up with different traditions and values. Feeling difficult to integrate into the culture practice of the local English-speaking community, Jin and Lan seldom relaxed themselves and sought interaction opportunities in clubs. The participants' experiences of differentiation between Chinese and British culture may lead to psychological stress. Perceiving the culture distance, Yin mentioned her uncomfortable feelings of being an 'outsider', rather than being accepted as a temporary member of the host community in the interview. It is evident that the psychological barrier caused by students' feelings of rejection from the host culture has negative impacts on their social contact with host country nationals during their study abroad journeys (Hunley, 2010; Pedersen *et al.*, 2011).

With regard to the participants' struggle to increase their involvement in the local English-speaking community, the support they receive from the language teacher is beneficial but limited. In order to operate functionally in British society, Chinese students have to learn knowledge of British English language norms and cultural practices. In terms of the linguistic knowledge, the participants perceived that there was a great distance between the formal English they learned in the classroom and the informal conversational English that British used outside the classroom. For instance, Zhu considered the colloquial expressions of oral English as a major obstacle to his interaction with his colleagues in the local hospital. Besides some vocabulary particularly used in Britain English, the data suggests that other figures of authentic

spoken English in British life, such as slang, dialects and idioms have been seldom introduced into the language classroom. This disconnection between English practices in the classroom and the English practices that the participants take on outside of classroom constrain their movement towards fuller participation in the local English-speaking community. In respect of culture knowledge, the data suggests that the language teachers tend to introduce the cultural practices in British society to the students, without explicating the social value embedded in these practices. As a result, after Anita and Storm's instruction, Xu seems still does not know when is the right moment to make an appointment, or why the British should use those 'appropriate' English in a restaurant. Without language teachers' thorough explanation on the cultural meanings of the social activities in Britain, the participants might not be able to participate effectively in these activities in the way that British do, just by observing, imitating and participating.

10. CONCLUSION

As Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest, moving towards full participation in a certain community is more than learning pre-given knowledge and sets of skills; it also requires access to a wide range of activities and opportunities for participation in communities of practice. Some linguistic and cultural routines can be learned in minutes, performed in seconds in the language classroom, but they only become meaningful when language learners can integrate them into practice outside the classroom. Then, when Chinese students choose to study English language in an English-speaking country, what they need is not only the linguistic forms demonstrated in the language classroom, but also the opportunities to interact with native speakers, and to immerse themselves in the diverse cultural activities in the host society. Unfortunately, this study found that the Chinese students were not satisfied with the opportunities they gained to access the local English-speaking community during their study abroad journey in Britain. The Chinese students' participation opportunities appeared to be restricted and unequal due to access barrier, linguistic barrier, culture barrier and psychological barrier. This study provides an example to illustrate what kinds of struggles and tensions that Chinese students might experience when they participate in the local English-speaking community. It also demonstrates how different participation opportunities individuals might be able to grasp when engaging in the same community of practice.

This study critically examines the relationship between schooled learning and participation under the framework of COP. First of all, the findings address the potential benefits of language teachers' instruction. When Chinese students newly arrive in the local English-speaking community in Britain, they have not experienced much about the multiple forms of informal British English and the culture practice of the community. Oral English usually involves many colloquial expressions, which have been accumulated from one generation to another (Li *et al.*, 2007). Culture practice consists of 'a particular way of doing, believing, and valuing that evolved over times much longer than any one person lives to see' (Lemke, 2008). Some of the oral English expressions and culture practice can be readily learned by observation and direct

participation, but there are also ones which can hardly be learned by temporary engagement, such as the embedded value of culture practice. For the detailed descriptions and critical explanations of those culture activities, international students have a special need for schooling.

Second, the findings highlight the needs for language teachers to consider the factors that influence Chinese students' participation in the local English-speaking community. In regard to access barrier, language teachers may need to find more ways to promote the effective contact between Chinese students and the local British, such as informing Chinese students the opportunities of taking part the voluntary work in the local community (Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2006), inviting them to participate in the services practised in the local church, introducing Chinese students to the local British who are interested in Chinese people or Chinese culture, or encouraging them to join local social clubs according to their own interests. As for linguistic barrier, the data indicates that there is a profound disconnect between language classroom practices and the practices that the Chinese students take on outside of language classroom. In order to bridge this gap, language teachers may need to include the various features of authentic spoken English in British life in their teaching curriculum, and equip students with linguistic strategies to compensate for their limited English language skills when engaging in conversation with locals. Providing vivid documentation on the British culture and host environment may enhance Chinese students' understanding of the culture practice of the local community. With more opportunities to interact with local British and to integrate into the host culture, Chinese students' feelings of being detached from the community around them might be alleviated. Hence, they would experience less loneliness and psychological stress.

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